

Tooth whitening

What you should know

If you want to whiten your teeth, the best place to start is with a healthy mouth. Tooth decay, sensitive or cracked teeth, infections or periodontal (gum) problems should be diagnosed and treated before any tooth whitening procedure. Otherwise, you could experience discomfort. The whitening process may aggravate existing problems, or the whitening process simply may not be right for you.

BEGIN WITH DENTAL CHECKUP

Rather than heading to the local cosmetic counter or shopping mall in search of tooth whiteners, start with a dental checkup. Your dentist can evaluate, diagnose and treat any pressing oral health conditions and advise you about different options to safely and effectively whiten your teeth. Your dentist also can determine whether whitening will work for you. When the dentist diagnoses the cause of the discoloration—injury, stains from food or tobacco, antibiotic treatment as a child or other causes—a suitable tooth-whitening method or product can be selected. The diagnosis is important; otherwise, you could be wasting time and money because whitening treatments work only on natural tooth enamel, not on crowns, veneers, bonding materials or tooth-colored fillings.

Many tooth whiteners are advertised on Web sites, television infomercials and the radio, as well as in magazines and newspapers. The American Dental Association (ADA) is concerned about the safety of tooth-whitening chemicals and procedures that are performed without the care or supervision of a licensed dentist. The ADA recommends that if you choose to have your teeth whitened or use a bleaching product, you should do so only after consulting with a dentist. If the chemicals used to whiten teeth are not applied properly, they could damage soft and hard tissues in the mouth.

TOOTH-WHITENING KIOSKS

Recently, tooth-whitening kiosks have appeared in malls and salons. In at least one state, these

kiosks have been banned. Although they may be staffed with people wearing “scrubs” or laboratory coats who may look like health care professionals, that often is not the case.

Staff running the tooth-whitening kiosk may have no health care training and no license to provide health care services. However, they are dispensing chemicals that could permanently affect your teeth and gingivae (gums).



INFECTION CONTROL TECHNIQUES

Dental office staff members are trained in infection control techniques that follow the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines. The guidelines include such procedures as changing examination gloves and disinfecting work surfaces after each patient visit, washing hands and following other infection control procedures.

Talk with your dentist about the pros and cons of different whitening treatments and what may be right for you. He or she may suggest a simple procedure that can be performed in the dental office. This procedure is called “chairside bleaching” and may require more than one office visit. Each visit may last from 30 minutes to one hour. Your dentist also may dispense a product for daily use at home for a period of weeks.

White, bright teeth are desirable, but having a healthy smile is more important. Your dentist can help you achieve not only a whiter, more attractive smile, but one that is healthy and contributes to your overall health. ■

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“For the Dental Patient” provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.